



Hearts and Minds

Developing and Maintaining Mindful Working Practices at the Front Line

A development research report

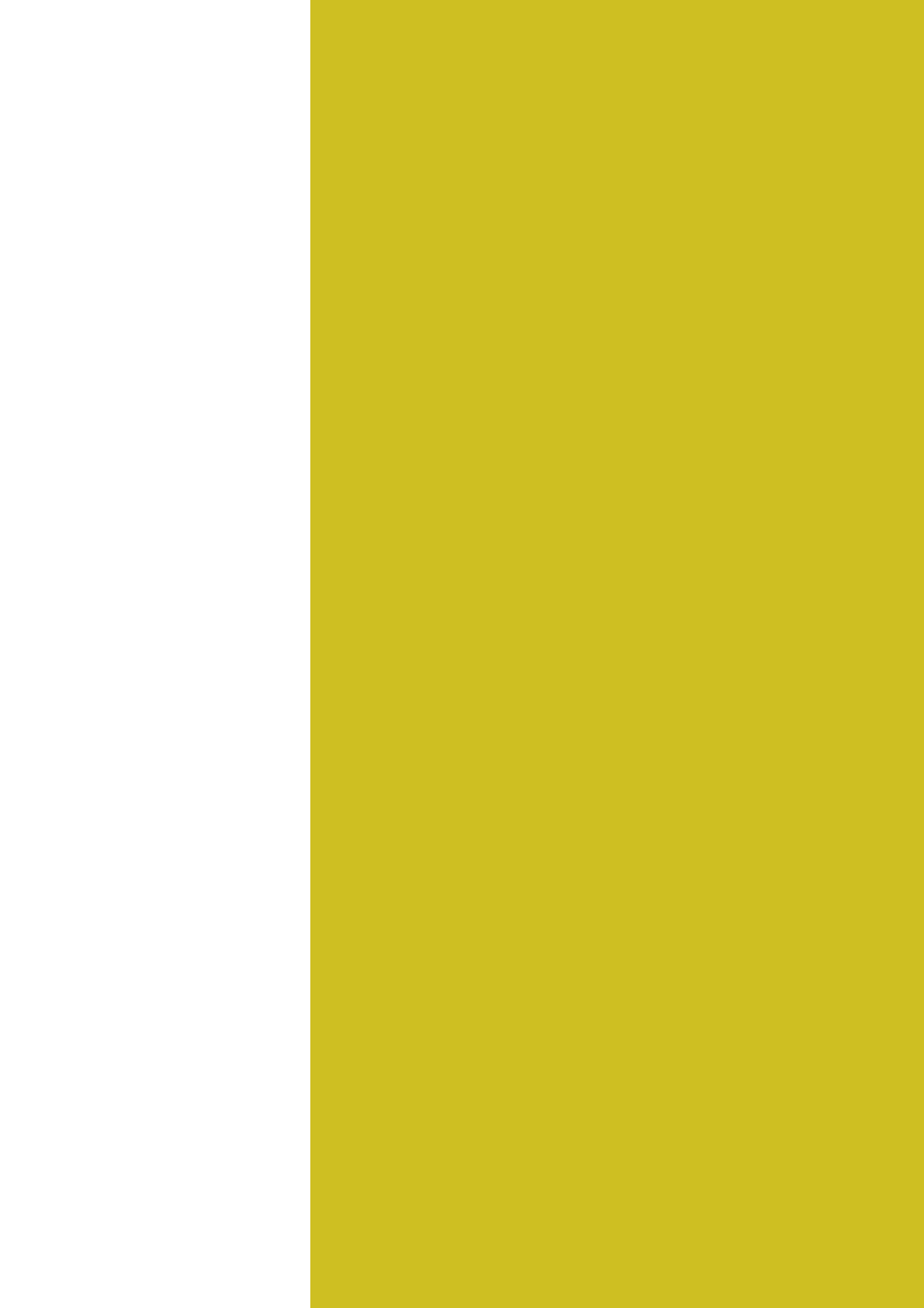
by Kate Farley
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“We need to recruit for the right characteristics, which include empathy and self-knowledge and an understanding of how your behaviour impacts on others. A great support-worker, housing officer, teacher or nurse, will: be innately social and interested in people – their motivations and drivers; listen, pay attention and make time for others. They need to be resilient to survive and thrive in a difficult public sector working environment”.



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1 intro

The Mindful Leadership Foundation (tMLF) provides coaching, personal and leadership development to value-based organisations. It aims to make a difference to those who make a difference: to help those who help others.

We have been privileged to work with the leadership teams of numerous Housing Associations and Social Care providers over the last 10 years, and have become intrigued about the pivotal role of the front-line housing officer and support worker in transforming lives, and the worrying phenomenon of 'burn out'. The complex personal issues they tackle with their clients, whilst coping with the burden of regulation and inspection, budget cuts, staff shortages, new initiatives and constant change, can detract from their sense of vocation and motivation and lead to apathy, frustration and poor customer care.

How can we continue to attract people with the right skills and resilience? and how can we nurture and develop them to continue to believe in what they do and to make a difference in people's lives?

The public sector has tried various combinations of culture change programmes, customer service training, restructuring, team-building and performance management, which have met with some success. tMLF believes there may be another vital component – a "mindful" approach to front-line service delivery that can nurture and sustain compassion, job satisfaction and a positive customer experience.

The Mindful Leadership Foundation interviewed a range of senior executives from housing and social care, teaching and healthcare to see how approaches and concerns varied across professions. If they did....

The case studies, which have been anonymised, are:

1 People and Process

Sally, Quality Director in the NHS, talks about care in the current climate.

2 If Only

Kristin, a Housing Director, explores lessons learned from a housing association culture change programme

3 Perceptions

James and Paula, who head a national care organisation, consider the challenges of matching the values and expectations of support-workers with organisational goals

4 It's all about Relationships

David, a housing association CEO, looks at an approach to revolutionising the customer experience

5 Peer Support

Lizzie, a psychotherapist, considers how therapists get peer support to help them to take the strain

6 What Makes a Great Teacher?

Mary, a headteacher, stresses the importance of life experiences and confidence in your approach

7 Leadership Rules

Philip talks about creating the right leadership environment for a successful front-line team

8 Change is Constant

Jim and Tina, housing association CEO and head of service, explore how their care and support team can survive and thrive in the current climate

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Case Studies

“There has to be a dialogue for there to be a relationship, through which you can build trust, openness, understanding, acceptance and self-awareness, which enable people to cope with conflicting expectations and restrictions, to be more interested and engaged, have self-confidence, to delegate and to take personal responsibility”.

Sally Quality Director in the NHS



People and Process

For an industry whose sole purpose is the health and well-being of people, the National Health Service is actually dominated by process. When lives and £billions are at stake, it's no surprise that the management response is one of control, standard-setting and continuous process redefinition to prevent waste, negligence and mistakes. Imagine then, being a senior manager, responsible for Quality at an NHS Trust hospital. This is Sally's job - responsible for patient safety, H&S, clinical audit, risk management, complaints, serious incidents, litigation, inquests and (when there's time) quality improvement.

Sally's hospital is not large and is just on the cusp of being clinically viable, providing in-patient and out-patient services, maternity care and 24-hour A&E services. With financial challenges, several recent high profile serious incidents and the never-ending search for cost-savings, the hospital leadership is under pressure and subject to political and media scrutiny like never before: a picture depressingly familiar to many other public service providers.

Sally's position gives her a unique insight into how crisis management, continuous change and new initiatives impact on the people on the front line. She works with people who want to care for others and want to be valued for the difference they make, but who don't have the time to listen, empathise and understand because they're busy coping with the latest changes, learning the new guidelines, and introducing new systems on top of running existing ones. And all this while dealing with people at their worst - in pain, in grief and in fear. Bureaucratic controls and scrutiny look a lot like mistrust and can result in people losing (or perhaps abdicating) autonomy, responsibility and job-satisfaction. People become ground down and protect themselves with 'gallows humour' and focusing on the process and not the patient, and so earn the reputation for being uncaring.


There is a grudging acceptance of the need to tick boxes and fill in forms, but that's not what gets them up in the morning. There's a long-hours culture, where the most conscientious and capable are given more and more to do, and

managers are 'too busy' to be available to their teams - with their inevitable focus on the latest Government initiative, KPIs and budgets, they can appear as uncaring too.

There's been recent debate about bringing back compassion into nursing, and new training being offered for staff. But is this treating the symptoms rather than the underlying disease? If it's unrealistic to expect to fundamentally change the risk-averse, financially constrained and rule-based character of the NHS, are there ways to enable the people who work in it to cope with these pressures, to build their resilience and nurture their caring and people skills?

Sally knows that the occasional "thank you" from a patient goes a long way, as does being recognised by your boss for doing a good job. She believes that it is crucial to job satisfaction and the quality of care for patients, to create time and space for personal interaction - between staff and patients of course, but also between teams and their managers. There has to be a dialogue for there to be a relationship, through which you can build trust, openness, understanding, acceptance and self-awareness, which enable people to cope with conflicting expectations and restrictions, to be more interested and engaged, have self-confidence, to delegate and to take personal responsibility.

Working as a team is vital - to support and learn from each other, and it is here that the NHS has something to share with other public sector organisations - how to learn from when things go wrong. Incident-reporting, clinical audit and investigations are just part of 'the way we do things round here'. Perhaps counter-intuitively in a world where lives and lawsuits are at stake, it is common practice to openly review cases with peers, in a non-judgmental way, without attributing blame, but with the aim of sharing views and finding ways to do better next time.



“It took time, but gradually the mood of the team changed to be more positive, creative and achieving, with better feedback from customers and colleagues. But not everything went smoothly. The team-leaders struggled with the challenge of embracing the changes themselves whilst supporting their staff through the change process.”

Kristin Housing Director



If Only

Kristin was a new Housing Director, taking on the challenge to turn around an under-performing department, with a poor customer service track record. The Housing Team was one of the principal customer interfaces, whose purpose was to help tenants with problems with their homes, their tenancies, their neighbours and communities. But this was not a happy or successful team, characterised by: a lack of hope, pride or enjoyment in their work; avoiding tenants and tricky issues; feeling under-valued and over-worked; blaming other colleagues, the budget/policy/procedure, or even the customer; and seemingly self-interested with little empathy for others. Not surprisingly this was translated into poor customer feedback and KPIs.

Kristin began to understand that these problems were symptoms caused by a number of underlying management and infrastructure issues and not because these were 'bad' people – most people get into Housing because they want to help others. For some this might be a bad fit from the outset, but for others, prolonged exposure to a controlling management culture, strict regulatory standards and external scrutiny, excessive bureaucracy, rationing of increasingly limited resources, negative media stereotypes, a focus on task and process (rather than purpose and outcome), and a never-ending supply of difficult, emotionally-draining situations to try and resolve with their tenants, gradually wears them down – what you might call 'burn out'.

Kristin knew from networking with other Housing Directors, that this was not a phenomenon just in her association, but a common problem, which leadership teams were trying to address in a variety of ways – typically customer care training programmes, restructuring and redefining roles, and recruiting different skills. But she also felt strongly that more could be done to nurture and support people working in the front-line of housing, to sustain their sense of vocation, motivation, job satisfaction and achievement over the long-term. To lose people to burn-out, poor performance, resignation or redundancy, is a terrible waste of all that early enthusiasm, skill and accumulated knowledge.

Although we might not be able to significantly change the way the public sector works, it must surely be a worthwhile investment for Housing Associations to invest in the resilience, self-esteem and motivation of their field staff, so they can survive and thrive despite the bureaucracy, centralised standards and controls, spending cuts and increased customer needs and expectations.

Kristin worked with the senior managers and team-leaders to develop a long-term change plan to:

- clearly state purpose, expectations of behaviour, roles and team-work
- change KPIs and individual performance measures to be about outcomes for people;
- say thank you, praise others, promote and celebrate achievements;
- learn from mistakes and complaints and share ideas with colleagues;
- rethink policies and procedures to be more enabling rather than prescriptive (and less of them!) and simplify work-flows;
- provide regular team and training events; and
- tackle the 'bad apples' and recruit new staff with the right people skills.

It took time, but gradually the mood of the team changed to be more positive, creative and achieving with better feedback from customers and colleagues. But not everything went smoothly. The team-leaders struggled with the challenge of embracing the changes themselves whilst supporting their staff through the change process. They also found it difficult (partly due to inexperience) to tackle poor performers through the capability/disciplinary process whilst promoting more positive team-work. It took too long to move these people on and meanwhile their negativity detracted from the positive changes and drained the time and energy of the managers. Although the team-leaders were offered independent coaching support, they did not take this up because they were 'too busy'.

“At their best, the leaders are inspirational role models, in an organisation that develops its own and provides career and personal development opportunities to prevent burn out and disillusionment”.

James & Paula National Care Organisation



Perceptions

James and Paula run a national organisation that supports people with learning disabilities and people with autism, which means they really understand people – what they need to make their own choices and decisions about their lives and what drives some people to help, support and care for others.

Care and Support – a difficult business to be in nowadays, with increased regulation and scrutiny, public spending cuts, new initiatives and infrastructure changes which have meant changes to terms and conditions, TUPE transfers and fear of yet more change. Many staff would say that “the job isn’t what it used to be” – more monitoring, efficiency-savings, timesheets and IT, than you might imagine when supporting people to live the life they choose. This economic pressure is having a negative effect on caring organisations who can begin to focus more on process, rules, maintaining the system and their own survival, than on their customers – or this is how it can be perceived. There’s also the negative effect on the individuals who provide the support – diminution of terms and conditions, less time to spend with customers, more paperwork, more saying no. “Is this really what my job is?”

In these conditions, James and Paula believe that it is vital that they retain a strong focus on the long-term, core purpose of the organisation and communicate this well and in person, to resist the potential short-term expediency of commissioners, conflicting messages and a dislocation between the managers and their teams. Recruiting for the right skills, followed up with in-depth induction

are essential to matching perceptions to reality and fulfilling aspirations about what really matters – the outcomes for the people they support.

Service Managers need to be able to manage the impact of a negative minority (or just a bad week) on other staff, and develop and support resilience. There has to be a balance between compliance, discipline and “feeding the beast” (of bureaucracy) with creativity and quality time spent with the people being supported.

At their best, the leaders are inspirational role models, in an organisation that develops its own and provides career and personal development opportunities to prevent burn out and disillusionment. Corporate messages, success measures and the daily actions of the leadership team recognise, reinforce and value the transformational and personal working relationships with the people they support. They are visible, accessible, involved and honest – recognising mistakes and learning from them, without fear or blame. They can balance creativity with pragmatism and promote compliance without dampening enthusiasm. They give their staff the tools they need to do their jobs and strive to get the basics right.

Supporting people to live the life they choose, and working with them through their challenges, set-backs and achievements carries an emotional toll for the service-provider – many of whom are lone-workers, can feel isolated and can have their own issues to deal with. Their managers need to be able to identify when individuals are struggling and create formal and informal opportunities for people to offload and share their experiences.

“Housing Associations need to allow greater autonomy, creative problem-solving, having ideas, trying new things, taking risks and getting some of them wrong. Leaders need to ensure that their teams have the tools for the job – that means recruiting people with the right skills, in-depth induction and better matching of workload to staff resources”.

David Housing CEO



Its all about Relationships

David's leadership role for a Midlands-based Housing Association, is to create ways to provide great customer experience for their 60,000 [or so] residents. They've been on a tremendous journey of restructuring, culture change, moving to new open plan offices, and creating a positive vision to motivate staff and improve customer satisfaction. It's been really successful, but David remains aware of the potential for 'burn out' amongst the housing management teams, and knows that some people are equipped to thrive with the changes, whilst others aren't.

His experience, both as a field officer and as a senior manager, is that the Housing Officer role can feel like it's high pressure, emotionally challenging and constrained by bureaucracy. The focus of Housing Management has, for decades probably, focussed on enforcement – complying with tenancy conditions, paying rent on time, not causing a nuisance to your neighbours, and meeting legal housing standards. So there are probably too many prescriptive policies and procedures, irrelevant performance measures and Government standards, and too much scrutiny and inspection, which encourage a risk-averse, uncreative culture and un-rewarding work.

So, Housing Officers can become disillusioned and feel hard done by – somehow believing that their job is 'different' and harder than other jobs, that its just one problem after another and no-one else fully understands or values what they do. Sometimes, because of the pressures of external scrutiny, benchmarking and negative media, the leadership can fall-back on a centralised, controlling approach which stifles creativity. At worst, individuals' decisions are over-ruled 'higher up'..... so "what's the point?"

David's vision is to redefine the landlord:tenant relationship to focus on helping people to make the most of their opportunities: To use the benefits of social housing as a foundation to work with families and communities to improve their education, employment and life prospects. This means a fundamental change to the relationship between Housing Officers and their customers, and moving with the times.

To enable their staff to support and develop tenants, Housing Associations need to allow greater autonomy, creative problem-solving, having ideas, trying new things, taking risks and getting some of them wrong. Leaders need to ensure that their teams have the tools for the job – that means recruiting people with the right skills, in-depth induction and better matching of workload to staff resources. It also means giving them the latest IT equipment, time for listening and learning, developing new communication skills (twitter, blogging, facebook, etc), positive recognition and feedback, and ongoing training.

Ongoing support and investment in housing teams, is essential to maintain their ability to care about their tenants. This should include non-judgmental coaching and supervision, mentoring (not linked to line management), peer support and learning from each other, empowering them to make decisions, and trusting them to be out of the office most of the time – enjoying working with their customers. They are individuals, not 'standard performance units', and they can bring their own skills and experiences to bear. We can also better equip them to have brave conversations, be resilient in the face of emotionally challenging situations, and provide training in relationship management – it's not enough to just know about housing standards and tenancy law, but to understand people.

“We could better support and nurture people working in a wider range of ‘caring’ professions by developing a more supportive model of supervision, where trust, openness and understanding can supersede the fear of risk, mistakes, blame, complaints and litigation which plagues public services”

Lizzie Psychotherapist



Peer Support

Lizzie is training to be a psychotherapist. This is not something she drifted into from school, but an idea that took many years to develop into a calling. Lizzie wants to use her empathy and listening skills and her interest in what makes other people tick, to help people who are lonely, mentally ill, unfulfilled, or struggling to make their way in the world.

Like so many teachers, nurses, housing and support workers, and other similar professionals, Lizzie has invested considerable time and her own money to do her training and learn the practice to give her the necessary skills. She is driven to offer something back to society, to make a difference to people's lives, and she is excited to contribute to a relatively new field that is gaining increased recognition.

But anything that worthwhile is not easy. The time, cost and personal commitment to learning the skills and getting the qualifications are barriers to people joining the profession. Psychotherapy is not well-understood - there are stigmas attached to both the practice, and the intended beneficiaries. Can talking really help people with severe mental health issues, or is it an expensive past-time for the self-indulgent? Access through the NHS can be difficult and likely to become more so with the current climate of public spending cuts. But if you can secure a job and/or build up a client base, how can you survive the personal and emotional challenges involved in such a demanding role?

Lizzie thinks that her resilience comes in part from her own self-awareness - knowing her limitations and her strengths, and from her passion and belief that she is doing something valuable. The training she has chosen has placed great importance on the therapist's ability to look after themselves and how to be attuned to feelings without getting drawn in and carrying the client's emotions. Therapists offer a non-judgmental acceptance of what it is to be human. Having the ability, and giving priority, to understand and make sense of the joys and struggles in life, is as relevant to the therapist as it is to their clients.

Lizzie believes this requirement and capacity enables her to stay emotionally grounded, and to recognise and seek support when she is not!

There are many essential means of support available within the profession. There is a culture of openness and sharing with one's peers, non-judgmental review of cases, recognition that learning is an ongoing process, and a formal structure of peer groups and personal supervision. So important is the ongoing support and well-being of the therapist, that regular, supervision is a requirement of accreditation. The therapist talks about recent experiences and ongoing cases and can get a second opinion or essential back-up. Its also available in a crisis, if the therapist needs some urgent help. During training Lizzie's supervision has been very transparent, with a written and audio record or each session to aid open learning.

So does this have relevance for teachers, housing officers or social workers? Well, we can recognise the common themes of vocational calling, compassion for our fellow human beings and the desire to make a contribution to society. There are also similarities in the constant hurdles of spending cuts, dealing with bureaucracy and not feeling properly recognised or valued. And the importance of resilience to cope with the daily emotional toll of trying to help people with their problems and improve their lives. But this type and level of peer support and encouragement to be personally aware is not usually evident. Could we better support and nurture people working in a wider range of 'caring' professions by developing a more supportive model of supervision? where trust, openness and understanding can supersede the fear of risk, mistakes, blame, complaints and litigation which plagues public services.

“The leadership team needs to constantly promote the core purpose and the focus on the children. Coherence with core values is an absolute, but variety, acceptance of different styles and innovation need to be encouraged and rewarded”

Mary Headteacher



What Makes a Great Teacher?

According to Mary, the Head of an achieving comprehensive school, being a great teacher is all about your own life experiences that you can bring to bear. Mary understands this well from studying this very issue for her Masters thesis and her experience of working in industry and subsequently in education. Teaching is a physically and emotionally challenging job – getting 30–40 young adults to engage, think, work together and make progress in 40 minutes before moving onto the next lesson, means that you have to be resilient, get your job satisfaction from working with and inspiring young people, and be able to use your own strengths and skills to get results.

And yet this doesn't seem to fit well with the current policy framework. Teaching is not the revered profession it once was and the last years' of constant change, new national curriculae, standardisation, inspection, centralised decision-making, bench-marking and new initiatives have stifled creativity and instilled a fear of failure. They can feel hard done by, not trusted to use their professional judgment and become risk-averse. For some teachers, this stress builds up over many years due to the demands of the job and the regulatory, bureaucratic environment, such that their initial enthusiasm and energy gets ground down, their performance and motivation goes downhill and their career may even end on a sour note.

Mary accepts that there is a need for standards, accountability and rigour and is herself working to tackle poor performance whilst providing security and opportunities for growth for her staff team. It's not easy to recruit quality teachers nowadays and a minority were

incentivised to become teachers without the right motivation and sense of vocation. She thinks there should be more flexibility in the national framework and regulatory system, and is positive about recent policy changes that have 'swung the pendulum' back towards learning and the classroom. But she also thinks that school leaders can do more to nurture and develop their teachers to counter the negative pressures.

The leadership team needs to constantly promote the core purpose and the focus on the children. Coherence with core values is an absolute, but variety, acceptance of different styles and innovation need to be encouraged and rewarded – Mary would rather that a teacher tried something new which didn't work than 'stuck to the script' every time. The school leaders need to promote a culture of peer review, sharing ideas and giving constructive feedback: Mistakes should be allowed and learned from. But being observed and judged is not something that teachers find comfortable and these skills require training and experience.

One of the consequences of public spending cuts is the lack of ongoing professional development and training opportunities for teachers over and above the mandatory courses – primarily focussed on curriculum and legislative changes. So the leadership team needs to find ways of investing in their staff, making them feel valued, and providing space and time to refresh. Mary recommends a real emphasis on constructive praise, positive messages, thank yous, rewards and shared celebration of achievements. Teaching is personal and teachers give of themselves everyday. She thinks that mentoring, or coaching, or some kind of external sounding board would provide emotional support, and help build confidence and resilience.

“There are job challenges and external pressures that need to be constantly managed to counter the negative effects of too much bureaucracy, a public sector tendency towards command and control, and an emphasis on prescriptive standards and processes rather than purpose and outcomes. In this environment, staff can feel hard done by and undervalued, become disillusioned, lose motivation and get written off”.

Philip Housing CEO



Leadership Rules

Philip runs a Housing Association in the North-East of England and has seen how the role of the Housing Officer has changed over the years – mostly positive and to some extent in how it is perceived. Housing Officers have always been at the forefront of working with deprived communities, tackling diverse and difficult problems, but the significance of community engagement, job skills development, child protection and anti-social behaviour has become more recognised and understood. The current national housing policy and welfare benefit changes provide a new set of challenges and further impetus to develop the holistic, person-centred role of the Housing Officer. The promised 'lighter touch' regulation and less emphasis on centralised targets and inspection will help to reduce some of the fear, bureaucracy and standardisation which have recently stifled creativity and ownership.

Philip has led his organisation through a major leadership development programme recently and believes this has paid great dividends in developing a positive and performing culture. This must start from the top, and at the beginning. The leaders in the organisation are the role models and what they say and do every day sets the tone: their written, verbal and non-verbal messages need to reinforce the vision and values of the organisation. They are encouraged to recruit new housing staff with the right competences – particularly communication, empathy, resilience and organisation, and follow through with a comprehensive induction.

But it doesn't stop there. There are job challenges and external pressures that need to be constantly managed to counter the negative effects of too much bureaucracy, a public sector tendency towards command and control, and an emphasis on prescriptive standards and processes rather than purpose and outcomes. In this environment, staff can feel hard done by and undervalued, become disillusioned, lose motivation and get 'written off'.

Although there are still a few 'hard nuts' to crack and the challenge of integrating staff TUPE'd from other organisations, Philip thinks his housing staff are of high-calibre and that their motivation and job satisfaction can be enhanced by paying attention to a few key leadership responsibilities:

- communication of a shared vision throughout the organisation, so that everyone knows what they are doing and why;
- a strong focus on purpose and ensuring that 'form follows function' (and not the other way around);
- delegation and trust to make decisions;
- give people the tools they need to do their job;
- positive and constant feedback about progress and achievements, focussing on outcomes for the customers;
- being proud of what we do and sharing our successes with our colleagues, partners and communities;
- visibility and presence - staff out and about in their communities, and leaders out and about with their staff;
- a commitment to learning and self-development;
- valuing and respecting each other;
- encouraging creativity and trying new ideas - allowing failure without blame.

“There’s a difficult balance to be achieved between ensuring compliance and quality, with delegation and individual performance. This must be based on a relentless emphasis on customer service – not just the formal training, but constantly reinforced and embodied by the leadership of the organisation and embedded in the culture”.

Jim & Tina Care & Support



Change is Constant

Change is constant – an oxymoron commonly used to describe working in the public sector nowadays, and perhaps in the field of supporting people more than any other. The last decade has seen a revolution in the way care and support is commissioned and provided, with increased regulation, costs being driven down (many think at risk to quality), increased competition from private companies and more challenging tendering and procurement processes.

To be “fit for the future”, housing associations who want to stay in the business have had to adopt a much more commercial approach, keep more detailed records of inputs and outputs, and reduce costs - which essentially means cutting staff pay and conditions. This is tough, as it frequently means that staff employed in this field are paid less than those in other areas of social housing, and it sends negative messages about their value as individuals and for the work they do. How can it be that the people who support the most vulnerable in our society get paid less than if they “stacked shelves at Tesco’s?”.

“Support Worker” can cover a wide range of roles, but their client group is typically challenging, difficult to engage with, and the work can be physically tough and emotionally draining. And all this while they face insecurity over whether another provider will win the next contract renewal, or if their service will be de-commissioned altogether.

They can feel vulnerable, angry and resentful and may ‘burn out’ – no longer able to care about their clients,

or leaving the sector altogether – what a waste of that skill and compassion! But what can managers do to prevent this, if the alternative is to lose the contract, the service and the staff to spending cuts, or a cheaper provider?

It must surely start with recruiting people with the right motivation, who know what’s involved, who care, have empathy, enthusiasm, listening skills and resilience. Nowadays, you also need good admin, organisation and IT skills, to be able to work remotely and get all the paperwork done without it getting in the way of their care and support. Of course making sure that there are sufficient staff resources, and giving them the time and tools to do the job is fundamental.

The other important role of the manager is to remove obstacles for their teams. Making sure that the paperwork, management controls and processes are kept to the essentials to maximise contact time is also important – but for those who have grown accustomed to a tick-box, heavily scrutinised working environment, it’s not so easy to be trusted to use your own initiative and ideas, once the “safety blanket” is removed.

There’s a difficult balance to be achieved between ensuring compliance and quality, with delegation and individual performance. This must be based on a relentless emphasis on customer service – not just the formal training, but constantly reinforced and embodied by the leadership of the organisation and embedded in the culture. Those ‘customer experience’ programmes that go beyond the formulaic and

recognise the importance of human interactions, life skills and personal experiences, can be helpful.

Middle managers may have double the challenge – to cope with the significant changes thrust upon them, while supporting their teams to adjust, learn and develop new ways of doing things. They are critical to the success of any change programme and need to be sufficiently on board and supported to be successful. They need to recognise when their staff need more help, or more stretching and be open and realistic about the challenges, giving time and encouragement to cope with yet more change. They send consistent positive messages about their team’s role and achievements throughout the organisation. They encourage celebrating successes together and learning from each other as well as from other organisations.

Their leaders can support them by showing trust in their decisions and abilities, giving them time to develop and believing in their abilities without resorting to risk-averse policies and procedures, being clear about what is non-negotiable, and where discretion and creativity are encouraged. They lead by example - allowing mistakes, showing respect for colleagues and customers alike. They are authentic, accessible, responsive and trustworthy, and they listen. Leaders and middle managers work together to develop a shared vision and a forward plan that they can all be part of.

We cannot teach people anything; we can only help them discover it within themselves.

Galileo Galilei

Discussion



These case studies show a considerable consensus about the personal characteristics best suited to front-line staff delivering these services and a shared concern that their commitment, self-belief and effectiveness can be difficult to maintain in the face of long-term negative messages (about budget-cuts, scrutiny, high-profile mistakes), coupled with the impact of the challenging work on them personally. But there is also a belief and the determination to find ways to counter these negative pressures and look for ways to retain, nurture and develop those who want to work to help others and make a difference in society.

We are sometimes presented with the view that nurses have lost their compassion, housing officers don't care about their tenants, and support-workers are too busy with their paperwork, but this phenomenon may be caused by 'the system' which fails the service-provider as much as the service-user.

Individual organisations may have little influence upon central policy and funding directions, but their leaders can, and do, look for ways to invest in and support their staff, to continue to be motivated, proud and rewarded for the valuable work they do.

Providing a great service is more than just a good customer care approach. It is about having and showing compassion, respect and being able to maintain positive regard for clients – sometimes in the face of great personal challenges. It is also about reflection and learning – taking the time for this personally and as a team.

We can recruit for the best characteristics including care, empathy, listening, patience, an innate sociability and an interest in people – their motivations and drivers.

We can continue to develop and strengthen these skills to include self-awareness, better understanding of interpersonal relationships and knowledge of how our behaviour impacts on others. We need to nurture them and build their resilience to survive and thrive in a difficult working environment.

What matters is the relationship between the worker and their client. This must be trusting and transformational and it requires the space, freedom and autonomy to be responsive to individual needs. This is about having time to listen and understand, being aware of one's own strengths and style, trusting in your own judgement and being able to learn from mistakes. The senior leadership creates the conditions for success and shapes the values, purpose and messages about what matters throughout the organisation.

These case studies also highlight the importance of an open and trusting dialogue between colleagues, and accessible senior leaders who show their respect and recognition to their front-line teams for doing a great job.

The team-leader is therefore central to the recruitment of people with the right skills, to the ongoing support of their teams and to their learning and development. In turn, they must have confidence in their abilities and value, and the trust of the senior leadership.

Their management decisions should be about people – staff and customers, and not just about KPIs and budgets. They can build a team with a shared purpose, where people feel safe and have a sense of belonging; where they are listened to and where their contribution is welcomed and valued. But this era of great change and pressure to improve performance and reduce spending, places even greater demands on their time and their skills in managing people.

What these case studies have shown us is that, in order to provide a great service and a great place to work, it's not enough just to recruit people with the right skills and approach, but also to sustain these in the long-term through training and development, over and above the technical requirements of the role. In particular to:

- strengthen listening and communication skills
- understand and better manage interpersonal relationships (with both customers and colleagues)
- develop and adopt tools for reviewing and learning
- practise giving and receiving feedback

And to encourage personal growth and learning through:

- development of self-knowledge and self-esteem
- understanding what drives and motivates ourselves and others
- maintaining positive attitudes to other people
- supporting each other
- coaching and leadership development

And for leaders to model the way by:

- recognising the importance of, and allowing time for, listening, reflecting and learning
- showing respect, trust, compassion
- encouraging innovation and allowing mistakes
- saying well done and thank you

Conclusion

4

A number of key themes emerge from analysis of the case studies:

- the pressures of the public sector working environment on those working to deliver personalised, caring services;
- what it takes to be a successful support-worker, housing officer, nurse or teacher in this environment;
- the important role of the team-leader in sustaining his or her team;
- how the senior leadership can create the right working conditions;
- how tMLF approach could help front-line service teams to sustain their commitment and compassion.

1 A Challenging Working Environment

The public sector is not the safe, secure, respected and friendly working environment it may once have been. It's not just the current economic climate and political drive to cut public spending, but also increasing bureaucracy, public expectations and a sensation-hungry media, which have created a difficult working environment characterised by:

- centralised, prescriptive standards and regulation
- scrutiny, inspection and benchmarking
- cut-backs in spending on services, and rationing of delivery
- lengthy procurement processes, and a more 'commercial', short-term approach to commissioning
- reduced terms and conditions of employment
- more paperwork on compliance, evidence, measures and outcomes
- complaints, media attention, litigation and stigmatised customers and service-providers
- a command and control, risk-averse and prescriptive management culture
- domination by process, not people
- public loss of confidence and respect for the 'professionals'
- mistakes not allowed, not forgiven, nor learned from
- challenging customers with complex individual needs, coupled with increased demand and possibly unrealistic expectations
- a stream of new initiatives, change and yet more change

It is a concern that these working conditions run counter to the high-quality, flexible and personalised services that we want to experience. The bureaucracy is costly and takes time away from working directly with people. Simple numeric and cost-based measures send messages which can be at odds with qualitative goals. The prescriptive approach undervalues the dedication, skill, experience, training and professionalism of those delivering the services. All of which mean that people working in this environment can feel distrusted, defensive, fearful of blame and failure, unable to make decisions, disconnected from their organisation, overworked and undervalued, uncertain of their future, frustrated, helpless and lacking ownership.

Contrast this with the sense of vocation, selfless drive to give something back to society and desire to make a difference to people's lives, that motivates people to get into public services in the first place. These are the very characteristics that we want to recruit for and develop in our organisations.

2 Individual Characteristics

We want our front-line support-workers, housing officers, and care providers to be:

- motivated to help others and make a difference in society
- enjoy working with people
- good communicators and listeners
- resilient
- passionate
- caring and compassionate
- reflective
- able to learn and grow
- self-aware
- emotionally intelligent
- interested and engaged
- understanding, accepting and empathetic
- creative and problem-solving
- well-organised
- informed and realistic
- fulfilled
- values-driven
- supportive of colleagues
- a self-starter who can take initiative

3 The Team-Leader

The team-leader plays a pivotal role in managing the financial and bureaucratic pressures for their team, providing positive encouragement and supporting staff through change, whilst coping with all these difficulties themselves. It is a significant ask to expect them to have all the skills and behaviours required, i.e:

- being a mindful role model, exhibiting the desirable characteristics (summarised above)
- delegation and trust
- allowing mistakes, risk and variety
- making time for listening, learning, understanding
- accessible and honest
- emotionally intelligent
- open dialogue
- constructive feedback, thank yous and recognition,
- responsible
- inclusive & respectful
- outcome-focussed
- celebrating and sharing achievements
- able to interpret non-verbal and corporate messages
- and develop appropriate success measures

4 Senior Leadership

Ultimately it is the top leadership team that sets the tone and creates the conditions for successful front-line service delivery teams. They will share the same values and drivers as their staff, demonstrate their commitment to their customers (service-users) and maintain their focus on their core purpose and what really matters, by adapting to and deflecting regulatory and economic pressures. They will be:

- values-driven
- people-oriented
- leading by example
- living and promoting the values and purpose of their organisation
- able to share their vision and motivate others
- mindful
- emotionally intelligent
- keen to learn
- visible, accessible and responsive
- honest, trusted, authentic
- investing in people

- proud of their organisation and staff's achievements
- trusting and hands-off
- able to allow and encourage mistakes and learn the lessons from them
- encouraging of creativity and innovation
- giving people the tools they need to do their jobs, and removing obstacles
- matching resources to workload and expectations

5 Implications for tMLF

tMLF has been successfully working with leaders of value-based organisations for over 10 years to develop people who are interested in reflective, mindful, ethical and sustainable leadership. Our approach combines group-work, team support and development, reflection and coaching, to develop the four intelligences (cognitive, emotional, physical, spiritual), to enable growth and learning from a greater psychological understanding and acceptance, and create a supportive and learning network through which those who make a difference in the world can make a difference for each other.

What we have learned from this study, is that this approach and our experience could be applied to benefit front-line services, through a team-based learning and development programme which encompasses:

- self-awareness and self-esteem
- tools for reflection and learning
- listening and communication skills
- giving and receiving feedback
- understanding and managing relationships
- understanding drivers and behaviours
- coping with challenging situations
- sustaining positive regard for others
- building resilience and confidence
- supporting each other
- emotional intelligence
- empathy and compassion

Hearts & Minds

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*One of the things I learnt
when I was negotiating
was that until I changed in
myself I could not change
others*

Nelson Mandela

*The ideal is in thyself;
the impediment, too, is in
thyself*

Thomas Carlyle

*Each goodly thing is hardest
to begin.*

Edmund Spenser